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Captive Families, Governments and Corporations

The Kidnapping Epidemic

by Eliot Marshall

Since February 4 the networks and papers have supplied an eager audience with details on Patricia Hearst, her family, her kidnappers, the messages passed between them and the many squabbles that have broken out. No one knows how it will end, but it is beginning to look as though it will end badly. What attracts the attention of the media more than the cruelty of the crime is its political coloring. Last year the Justice Department won 71 convictions against kidnappers and turned 146 other cases over to local prosecutors. None received anything like the attention the Hearst case is getting. It brings America its first bitter taste of political terrorism, pitting an articulate, wealthy businessman in a life-or-death struggle against local terrorists with a cause.

If we need reminding that ours has been made one world by rapid communication, no better example is needed than the speed at which bad examples now travel. Latin America has provided some of them. Kidnappers in Argentina have collected about $50 million since the beginning of 1973, most of it from foreign businesses. As a result about 60 percent of the US executives stationed there have left, their jobs taken over by Argentines. Those who stay must work, travel and live under constant guard. Exxon set a record last month when it paid the largest ransom ever, $14.2 million, to rescue a refinery manager in Argentina, Victor Samuelson. He has not been released yet.

What can be done to prevent such extortion? On the world stage the United States takes the position that kidnapping and hijacking can be discouraged only if the "parent" countries or companies refuse to negotiate with terrorists. A couple of years ago, when hijackings and political killings seemed to have reached an unbearable level, President Nixon created a Cabinet Committee to Combat Terrorism and asked it to coordinate the anti-terrorist policies of the CIA, State Department, Secret Service, FBI, Transportation Department and other federal agencies. The current chairman of the committee, Ambassador to the Cameroons Lewis Hoffacker, wrote an article in February that sums up the official view: "Tactics vary in each crisis situation, but one consistent factor should be understood by all parties concerned: the US government will not pay ransom to kidnappers. We urge all other governments and individuals to adopt the same position." He noted that in the last five years 28 American officials have been kidnapped abroad and 10 murdered. Last week another diplomat, John Patterson, was taken hostage in the town of Hermosillo, Mexico, by a "liberation army" that wants $500,000 in cash.

Since 1963 the US has been trying to persuade governments to adopt this uncompromising position, with partial success. Cuba signed an extradition agreement with the US in 1973 that classifies hijackers as criminals who must be returned to the country of origin. Several other important agreements have been reached, but Hoffacker says the program became "bogged down" at a 1972 UN conference "in a debate over what some countries called justifiable, as opposed to legal, violence even against innocent parties."

There are drawbacks to the US policy, the most obvious being that governments may see the logic in refusing ransom, but corporations find it difficult to live with that logic, and families, impossible. Exxon was tested to the breaking point in Argentina. It first refused to pay the $14.2 million, then after the guerrillas announced that Samuelson would be "executed" for the crimes of his company on February 25, Exxon relented.

The Hearst kidnapping has "worked" in the sense that it has been prolonged by similar, conciliatory tactics. The kidnappers chose as their victim the daughter of a man whose power lies in managing the news: publicity becomes a part of the ransom demand. Besides commanding the printing of legalistic tirades in Hearst's paper, the *San Francisco Examiner*, the Symbionese succeeded in having their symbol—a seven-headed cobra—printed on every package of free food paid for by Mr. Hearst. The Symbionese demanded that two of their members accused of killing Marcus Foster, a superintendent of schools in Oakland, be given national television time to plead their case. Here they failed, despite Hearst's lobbying. If it were in his power to grant the request, there is no doubt that he would. This media-napping is an insidious aspect of the case, and it hints at crimes yet to come.

Fanatics feed on publicity. Thus when Reg Murphy, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, was kidnapped not long after Patricia Hearst, it looked as though the East Coast would have its own version of California political terrorism. But after making a few reactionary swipes, Murphy's captors took a fat ransom and let it go at that. Two people have been arrested. The FBI [illegible] which worked on the inverse principle: the kidnappers had no hostage

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